

# RETURN OF THE TIDE

DIALING THE TIME MACHINE  
BACK A HALF-CENTURY

*by Bob Putnam*



The idea of going back in time to witness historical events has fascinated people even before H.G. Wells published his classic novel, *The Time Machine*. In Mark Twain's *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*, it wasn't a machine, but a whack on the head with a crowbar that provided transport back to an earlier time.

On June 5, 2021, at the start of the Annapolis to Newport Race (A2N), there occurred the kind of magical time travel experience once depicted by Wells and Twain. And race spectators didn't need the incredible invention or medical trauma those famed writers depended upon to spin their tales.

Right here on Chesapeake Bay, in the starting area for the upcoming A2N, history came to life when a sleek, black 61-foot sloop swept past the Race Committee check-in boat. Just under a half-century ago, AYC committee members first recorded the destined-to-be-famous sail number 4444, denoting the presence of the legendary *Running Tide*.

The boat was custom designed by Sparkman & Stephens and built in the Netherlands for shipping tycoon Jakob Isbrandtsen. With a talented crew that included Hall of Fame sailor Victor Romagna, the aluminum sled won the 1970 Newport to Bermuda Race and 1971's Southern Ocean Racing Conference

(SORC). She was then acquired by Al Van Metre, a Naval Academy graduate and prominent real estate developer from Arlington, Virginia. The boat moved to a new home: Arnie Gay's Yacht Yard on Shipwright Street, in the shadow of AYC's main clubhouse.

The Van Metres—Al Sr., and his son, Beau— assembled an outstanding race crew, campaigning *Running Tide* out of Annapolis and Newport, and attending the Southern Ocean Racing Circuit in winter. In the following years, the boat established an astonishing record, eventually winning more than 200 races.

Among Tide's many triumphs were Class I honors in the A2N in 1981 and 1983. In recognition of her stellar accomplishments, a half-hull model of *Running Tide* is one of only five models displayed in AYC's Main Clubhouse in the collection named "Iconic Yachts of the 20th Century" that raced under the Club's burgee.

Continuing design developments slowly chipped away at *Running Tide*'s performance superiority in her class, and the Van Metres retired her from front-edge racing by the mid-1980s. In what was planned as a final chapter in the family's love affair with *Running Tide*, Beau Van Metre set out to sail the boat around the world. The voyage stalled in France when long-term construction closed the Suez Canal, and the family sold the boat in 1988.

After such a remarkable racing career, the boat had a somewhat checkered life with subsequent owners. Two French sailors each owned her for 15 years. In those three decades, her condition deteriorated from lack of maintenance and a hard grounding. Tide's fortunes were destined to change again, but restoration to her former elegance would follow an unlikely path.

One of the avid young sailors aboard *Running Tide* in her heyday was AYC member Larry Leonard. Being a member of the winning youth championship Sears Cup team helped Leonard garner a crew spot aboard Tide when he was a student at Annapolis High School.

"That opened the door to so many fantastic experiences," Leonard recalls. Among the most memorable were close races in the fierce rivalry between Tide and Ted Turner's *Tenacious*. Both boats were 61-foot Sparkman & Stephens designs, with crews comprised of some of the world's best sailors.

*Tenacious* was often crewed by veterans from Turner's victorious 1977 America's Cup team, and Tide also had her share of rock-star sailors aboard. Leonard remembers that, when the two famed yachts faced off,





4444



“the docks where we tied up would be jammed with spectators who came to see the celebrities.”

In following years, Leonard became a national and world champion in several sailing classes, founder of a major sail loft, and a professional coach and tactician on the international regatta circuit. In this latter capacity, in 2018, he had traveled to Saint-Tropez to coach an Italian crew in a regatta. Walking into the marina basin, his eye was attracted by a large, blue yacht. The boat was in a somewhat dilapidated condition, but she had unmistakably sleek lines.

Going closer, Leonard was stunned by the number on the faded sail cover: “4444.” Under the peeling blue paint was *Running Tide*, the once-gleaming black scourge of offshore yacht racing.

Leonard took photos of the boat and sent them to his friend, Beau Van Metre, back in the U.S. Beau, who had taken over the family’s real estate firm after his father’s passing, had never lost his feelings for *Running Tide*. He had tried in vain to repurchase the boat a couple times over the years.

The photos from Leonard came as a shock. The neglect was apparent. The aluminum hull was now marred with dents. The instruments from 30 years earlier remained in place, now opaque from sun damage. Worst of all, the deck structure showed damage from a grounding. In Leonard’s words, Tide had “literally hit rock bottom” when the aging French owner ran her aground and had to be rescued off the boat. She suffered serious damage, spending several hours on the rocks before being recovered.

It was then that Beau Van Metre opened the next chapter in the *Running Tide* legend. Feeling this special boat deserved better, and imagining a rebirth of sorts, he took his effort to reacquire Tide to a new level, enlisting Tom Maynard, owner of Atlantic Coast Yacht Brokers.

A veteran of numerous complex transactions involving megayachts from Newport to Ft. Lauderdale, Maynard is a master at arranging deals between intransigent parties. In this case, it was difficult to even converse with the elderly French owner, who was quite ill.



Working through a family member, Maynard eventually overcame the language barrier, and an initial rejection, to effect the sale. Beau and his wife, Dea, traveled to France to see what they had purchased.

They found *Running Tide's* hull had been painted blue...but hardly anything else had been done to the boat. In fact, when they walked across the narrow passerelle to step aboard, the Van Metres felt they'd entered a time capsule.

Everything was exactly the same, from deck hardware to the cushions. The cooler Beau had left below on his voyage to France was even still in the same position.

The decision to restore *Running Tide* in Newport led to a complicated delivery. Friend and crewmate

Conrad Hunter undertook the voyage of *Tide* on her own bottom from St. Tropez, France, to Genoa, Italy. *Tide* was then lifted onto a ship for transport to Ft. Lauderdale.

Since the boat arrived home in the U.S. during winter, Van Metre decided to take advantage of being in Florida, to check out the boat in a brief sea trial. With the boat off-loaded and the rig stepped, the Van Metres and a small crew headed out of Port Everglades. Just as they exited the channel, the engine suffered a catastrophic failure, issuing so much dark diesel smoke that the crew initially feared the boat had caught fire.

When the smoke cleared, *Tide* was towed back to port, derigged, and put onto a truck for a less picturesque voyage up the coast to Newport.





The delivery phase of the story ended at New England Boatworks (NEB), where the rebuilding phase began. To preside over technical details, Van Metre brought back David Pedrick, the famed designer who'd been involved in the original Sparkman & Stephens drawings of the boat. Pedrick decided to retain the original keel but designed a new rudder made of lighter materials. The mast was replaced with a carbon section, 10 feet taller and a third the weight of the original.

Longtime crew member Bob Sharkey oversaw every step of the hands-on restoration work—a daunting challenge. In addition to serious structural damage from the grounding, the team found sections of the aluminum hull badly damaged by electrolysis. These problems and more were corrected so skillfully by the NEB artisans that Van Metre recently pronounced the boat is now of “museum quality.”

The rebuild also signaled that future chapters of the *Running Tide* story will include family cruising. Van Metre had hydraulic winches and new roller furling equipment installed for headsails, as well as for an in-boom main. And the formerly stripped-out aluminum framing below decks now features comfortable interior furnishings.

Adjustments continued as Tide went through sea trials with her new equipment, then made her way to Annapolis to compete in the A2N. After an initial tune-up sail out of Newport in late April, Beau said the boat felt “a lot better than before,” and Pedrick pronounced himself “very pleased.”

A final piece of rebuilding the *Running Tide* legend involved the human element. In fact, the crew member with the longest tenure aboard thinks the relationship between owner and crew is the most fascinating part of the *Running Tide* story.

Jocko Allpress was a young transplant from Australia who crewed Tide during her out-of-the-box triumphs under her first owner. He remained a key player in the boat's success through the Van Metre years, and has been an integral part of her current restoration.

According to Allpress, when Al Van Metre Sr. came aboard, his classy demeanor and particularly respectful manner of treating the crew set the stage. For example, when a breakthrough sail design was brought aboard, Van Metre would gather the whole crew and say, “I arranged for you gentlemen to have this piece of equipment, and I would appreciate your opinion.”



The resulting mutual respect and teamwork contributed to a winning dynasty. And it was teamwork without a single star. Allpress, the expat from Down Under, uses a sports analogy to define Tide's type of teamwork: "Like rugby, we didn't need a quarterback."

High regard for every crew member seems destined to remain a constant aboard the boat, reflected now in the more cordial style of Beau Van Metre.

As word of Tide's rebirth began to spread from Newport, reconnections among former "Tiders" grew. In addition to Beau and Dea Van Metre, Larry Leonard, and the crewmates involved in delivering and rehabbing the boat, North Sails pros Rob Pennington and Mike Toppa signed on for the A2N. And the crew list continued to grow with more well-known sailors: Carroll "Bear" Johnson, Barrett Holby, Chris Patterson, Jerry Kirby, and P.J. Schaffer.

The genuine delight shown by so many elite sailors at the prospect of being aboard Tide again makes clear the special owner/crew dynamic that prevailed on the boat. This also is reflected in Beau Van Metre's comments about filling out his crew list for the A2N. He said, "It's not about just finding good people to race a boat; it's about sailing *Running Tide* with lifelong friends." 🚩



Photo by Will Keyworth